Surrealism in Charlie Kaufman's Synecdoche, New York

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

The surrealist movement began in the early twentieth century, taking the post-war world by storm. Its emphasis on the subjectivity of individual experience has become a core element in modern culture, notably the film industry. Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* utilizes surreal themes to engage the audience with a dream-like sense of unease. Kaufman explores his own questions about life through the characters of the film, and invites the audience to attentively empathize with their tragedy. Distinguishing the film's surreal themes brings clarity to the movement of surrealism, the message of the movie, and if it succeeds, life itself.

Acknowledgments

I thank Professor Elizabeth Dalton for her role as project adviser, providing timely resources and encouragement throughout this unorthodox semester. I thank Ty Stratton for his perceptive literary and ideological criticism, which refined this project beyond what it could have been without.

I thank Wyatt Lawrence for making me aware of this incredible piece of media, and Charlie Kaufman for so passionately crafting it with vulnerability and truth.

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Process Analysis Statement

The term "process analysis" describes perfectly the two aspects of my thesis: a personal processing of a profound film after the analysis of its key surrealist components. Both of these journeys have led me to unexpected destinations of mind and soul. Better understanding surrealist ideology made me appreciate the massive imagination artists require to effectively distance themselves from the monotony of reality. An engaged viewing of Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* inspires grim introspection, presenting a fully-realized dystopia of how tragic a lukewarm life can be.

My study of surrealism began by absorbing the history of the movement, its founding individuals, and surrounding history. Before deeper analysis, I had perceived the term "surrealism" like most individuals: a word implying the odd and macabre. It was not until this study that I learned of the movement's long and multifaceted development, whose direct inspiration on artistry and filmmaking carries long past the movement's end. Many surrealist ideas are so engrained in modern culture that it is difficult to trace their origin. The unruly manipulation of time and space in film, the focus on individual subjectivity and a general skepticism of organized power all began or were forwarded by surrealist thinkers. As has been said of other ideologies, all that was true and profound about surrealism has been assimilated into popular culture, leaving only the errors to study.

I gained an understanding of the movement's core motivations and tenets, followed its mild evolution, and attempted to track its residual elements in modern culture. For being so widespread, surrealism is a relatively cohesive worldview. This stems in part from the founders strict avoidance of defining the movement into a corner. Their general revolution sought to

confront the conscious of each individual, and that requires individual inspiration. They refused to associate with political movements or make statements on alternative worldviews. Instead, they stayed the pure course of their mission. Perhaps it is due to this single-minded, clearly-defined direction that surrealism has so thoroughly influenced modern culture.

Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* is a direct product of many surrealist ideas. It explores the fears of everyday human life. It addresses a breadth of philosophical inquiries spanning from the inadequacies of individuals to the destruction of all society. The film strikes at every viewer, and likewise, my thesis maintains a broad audience. The topics explored in *Synecdoche, New York* are not only valuable to surrealists, film critics, buffs, and Kaufman devotees – although they might prove especially pertinent to those groups – but all people who question the purpose of another day, another decision, or another creative act.

My first viewing of *Synecdoche, New York* was extraordinarily impactful, leading me to reflect on the meaning of life itself. It did not invoke this response by preaching a worldview or asking questions of the viewer, but through sharing the lives of its characters and inviting the audience to relate. The film presented me a new standard for what subtle storytelling is capable of expressing. Its surrealist themes are incorporated illusively, acting to keep the viewer's puzzled attention rather than startle or shock. If it keeps one's interest on the first viewing, multiple screenings are mandatory to start unpacking all the detail Kaufman's writing has to offer.

The next step in my process was analyzing the film scene by scene, character by character – tearing plot threads from sets and actors from performances, just as the film wholeheartedly engages in itself. The film is so bluntly self-aware by design, I feel as though I

analyzed a film that already knew and intended every seemingly novel thought I bring forth. I picked out the surreal elements and deconstructed their functions, bringing clarity to the film's message and Kaufman's writing. *Synecdoche, New York's* usage of surrealist methods is so profound and effective that my previously disenchanted pessimism towards surrealist principles has been replaced in part by awed respect for their ability to portray raw and relatable human experience. I analyzed an analysis of film and life itself, and gratefully, I garnered a deeper understanding of both.

Surrealism and Charlie Kaufman

You breathe heavily, standing at a podium overlooking a crowd of blank faces. Their stares pierce your soul, filling you with a desire to hide. Anxiously reaching for your notes, you finally realize it: you are naked. Standing before this endless crowd of people with no covering fills you with such embarrassment, you will simply faint!

You shoot up in bed, sweating, heart racing. It was only a dream. You could swear it was real, but in retrospect, the situation's dream-like nature is clear. The unknown venue and event, the eerily motionless crowd, and your stark-naked body clearly did not represent reality. They are elements of sur-reality: elements of the surreal.

The surreal is a discarding of the rules we know of reality. Dreams are the most relatable manifestation of this concept. Dream sequences, only revealed as such at the end, star so frequently in film that it is practically cliché. The Coen brother's *The Big Lebowski* contains an iconic and bizarre dream sequence in which Jeffrey Lebowski dances and flies through the legs of Viking women along an astral bowling alley lane.

Figure 1 –*The Big Lebowski*, Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998

Surrealism existed decades before motion pictures became mainstream in culture, and more than a century before fantasies of attractive, bowling raiders filled the screens. Film developed with a background of surrealist thinking, with filmmakers intentionally and unintentionally utilizing its ideals. While he does not identify with surrealism directly, screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's scripts universally contain surrealist notions. His scripts frequently trend the border between reality and the unbelievable, using the uncanny motifs to inspire thought in the audience about the relationships between people and their way of life. Jeremy Brock from BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) describes Kaufman's screenplays as "metaphysical, self-reflexive, hyper-aware, often using surrealist conceits to explore our fundamental anxieties" ("Charlie Kaufman | On Writing"). Kaufman has amassed critical acclaim for his work, including his directorial debut *Synecdoche, New York*.

The film is a tragic, harsh reminder of the futility of life. Upon completing my first viewing, I was stunned. I took an hour long walk to consider the story told to me, the characters, and how it could relate to what I understood about reality. This film left a lasting impact on me, and its persistent, subtle use of surrealism kept me engaged with the characters despite the overwhelmingly tragic trauma I witnessed. The artistically precise balance inspired this deeper analysis as to how surrealism can be used effectively to compel an audience. *Synecdoche, New York* is the best example I know of surrealism's ability to engage an audience with compelling characters, and coming to better understand this ability will allow me to continue decoding the film's meaning, and understand surrealist themes in filmmaking at large. The critical consensus mirrors this reaction, exemplified in this review summary by Dave Calhoun at magazine *Time Out*: "Somehow, because it resists unlocking, it feels more serious, troubling, significant. It's as funny as it's depressing. It's as brilliant as it is baffling." This resistance to unlocking keeps the

audience's interest, and allows further opportunity to baffle them with the unexpected, as it certainly did with me.

This paper is a personal exploration of *Synecdoche, New York* and surrealism, seeking to provide a basic context of the ideology, then use that lens to analyze the film. Better understanding the abstract nature of this film will reveal the underlying importance of surrealism to film critics, fans of Charlie Kaufman, and proponents of the surrealist ideology alike.

Surrealist Ideology

Exploring surrealist thought requires a clear understanding of its primary object of interest: consciousness. The conscious contains the memories, thought processes, and motivations of which we are aware; they are accessible to be recalled. Conversely, the subconscious contains the currently inaccessible memories, processes, and motivations. The subconscious can be known and manifest, brought into consciousness through remembering. The unconscious, however, contains the automated processes born from our genetics and natural processes. They underlie every mental process and shape the way we interpret reality. We are blind to their working because without them, we could not analyze them. Merely the act of analyzing them brings them into the conscious, making it a part of the subconscious. The unconscious is a necessary term which encompasses the parts of our mental processing that we cannot possibly come to understand.

The intersection between the three different components of consciousness is best seen – and most easily related to – in the world of dreams. It is humankind's waking function to better understand reality by rational observation. Alternatively, when we sleep, all areas of the brain become more active except the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for rationalization (Muzer

et al. 1). Our mind leaves behind any attempt to weave a cohesive narrative. This opens the floodgates of the creative faculties, casting aside the understood and anticipated rules of reality for exploration of the unknown and otherwise unknowable. The mind simply lets things slide, as it calls into being otherwise irrational combination of objects and situations from the memory. Films that mirror this nonsensical arrangement leave the audience with only two possible conclusions: the film's world does not work the way they thought, or the events take place under a set of different rules. Whichever the case, this lack of comprehension necessitates awareness and discovery from the viewer, allowing them to come to an understanding of the universe they are witnessing.

In the same way that an audience must come to interpret the film they watch, humans have been attempting to decipher the mystical nature of dreams far longer. Dreams span all of human history, and their uncanny qualities have been explored and explained by every culture on earth: for some, as visions, prophesies, or simply the bio-chemical output of the resting mind. For the majority of people, dreams happen to them, and they are just along for the ride. They do not consciously conjure up the oddities that fill their mind during sleep. They can only witness and remember the unnatural and unrealistic things that occur. In other words, dreams originate from our subconscious without our intervention. Our conscious mind allows us some degree of control, but the subconscious works in spite of our intentions and understanding of reality.

The heart of surrealist philosophy is the following of the subconscious direction; a complete lack of control, replaced by the endless, unhindered outflow of the impulsive mind. The mind is influenced by our actions, experiences, and culture. These factors form a framework through which we must consciously view all things, reducing the apparent complexity of the world. The collection of rules that comprise our worldview function between our senses and

comprehension, filtering out information that doesn't fit our existing understanding of reality, thus limiting our ability to understand the world and ourselves. Surrealist ideology teaches that the only way to evade this natural consequence is by intentionally throwing off the conscious mind and channeling unconscious impulses. The surrealist seeks the subconscious, typically repressed to our sleeping hours, for its autonomous perspective of reality, from reality's outset. Wallace Fowlie describes this elevation of the subconscious in his analysis of surrealist history and philosophy, *The Age of Surrealism*: "[Surrealism proscribes] an elevation of the subconscious man into a position of power and magnitude and the word now forces itself on us: sur-reality" (17).

Because of this break from society and typical, conscious thought, surrealist art breaks the mold of common sense, pattern, and artistic convention, substituting those for the pure overflow of the artist's subconscious. The strange, uncanny nature of surrealist art is a testament to the unique capacity of the surrealist method to produce utterly novel work. In order for it to be valuable, surrealists believe the artistic produce should be original to both the artist and the society which they are escaping. This is the surrealist aim:

> …to escape from the real, to create an antidote for the insufficiency of realism. It might be called a literature of evasion and escape, in which the hero undertakes, not an exploration of the world with which he is most familiar, but an adventure in a totally exotic land or an investigation of his dream world (Fowlie 18).

A person investigating their dream world might not find answers, but surrealists believe they will be better off for searching. The utility to be found in searching but not finding is in growing ever closer to the answers. Even if not precisely known, one's understanding of reality

can grow more accurate. Some truths discovered might have been more difficult to impossible to uncover only using the conscious mind.

Surrealists often neglect the question as to how limited the unconscious mind is bound to be. Just because we do not understand its inner workings does not mean it is inevitably more reliable than the conscious mind. Because the conscious mind was a later and more advanced development in evolutionary history, it seems reasonable to assume that it would be better than the unconscious mind for every task they share in common. But surrealists aim for something specific: they are only concerned with discovering truth, and they are skeptical of reason.

This desire for truth-seeking is ingrained in humanity fundamentally. Is this desire just as misleading as our societal obligations? Surrealism unpacks our many desires in the attempt to discover which are more true, primitive, and deeply planted in the human psyche. The various desires we feel are frequently at odds, as described in *Age of Surrealism*:

> The need for sincerity in literary expression . . . is really the belief that the conscious states of man's being are not sufficient to explain him to himself and to others. His subconscious contains a larger and especially a more authentic or accurate part of his being. It was found that our conscious speech and our daily actions are usually in contradiction with our true selves and our deeper desires (Fowlie 16).

Surrealism seeks to uncover truths impossible to know by observing reality. The movement sought to reinvent society surrounding each individual's own seeking of truth througbeingh their subconscious. Surrealism was not founded with answers to these fundamental questions, but on the idea that we cannot know, but the search is worthwhile.

Defining Surrealism

The complexity of the ideas surrounding surrealism makes pinpointing an adequate definition for this project difficult. Surrealism is defined by Andre Breton in the first Surrealist Manifesto as "Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern." This definition remained largely unaltered over the course of the movement. The founders of surrealism intentionally minimized the specificity of surrealist claims to this foundational level, leaving little room for debate as to surrealist motivations and beliefs. Because of this clarity, the same ideas put forward in surrealism are easily rediscovered before the movement began. Surrealism was not the first movement to advocate the empowerment of the individual, discrediting of rationality, and skepticism of reality, but it was the first to popularize these ideas on a global scale.

Figure 2 – *A Mad Teaparty*, Salvador Dali, 1969

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Surrealist ideas have circulated through society and artistry long before the name "surrealist" or its paired philosophy came about. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* are considered absurdist humor – sometimes called surreal humor – due to the constant lack of logic in its storytelling. The

connection between these fantastic worlds and surrealism is solidified by the collaboration between surrealist artist Salvador Dali and Random House publishers to print a 1969 limited edition featuring illustrations by Dali. The illustration below captures elements of Dali's distinct style and Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland*, featuring a melting clock and the Mad Hatter's tea table. Surrealist work very frequently contains just enough similarity to the subject matter to be recognizable, but is unlimited in its abstraction, following wherever the artist's mind leads.

Figure 3 – The Mad Hatter's Tea Party, The Colour Illustrated Nursery Alice, 1890 by Lee Anne, Chez CO, 2015, galerieco.wordpress.com/tag/mad-hatter

Wonderland is most commonly interpreted as a dream world in Alice's imagination, a place where the bored monotony of reality can be cast aside in favor of unexpected adventures. This dream-like nature led surrealists to accept *Wonderland* as an adopted piece of surrealist literature, bringing together physiological themes with a familiar nonsensical tone. Mirroring surrealist themes of individual interpretations of reality, *Wonderland's* Cheshire Cat said, "I am not crazy, my reality is just different from yours" (Carroll *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*).

Surrealism in Film

Surrealism relies on an overstimulation of the senses to conjure information from the subconscious. “One sees images and makes certain emotional connections in one’s mind. If the vision revealed is too much for the rational mind to absorb (too intense, too threatening, too ‘real’) yet cannot be rejected, then it leaves the consciousness and comes to exist on a sublime level as pure surrealism” (*Surrealism and the Cinema* 13). Film is the perfect medium to express surrealist ideas because of the multitude of ways in which it outputs information: at least visually, auditorally, and emotionally. The plethora of interworking components in film also allows opportunity to subtly forgo viewer expectation: audio can be distorted, visuals abstracted, and character interactions written unpredictably. The oldest examples of filmmakers who aligned specifically with the surrealist movement are littered with storytelling which forgoes cause and effect in favor of the abstract interpretation generated by the audience (*Surrealism and the Cinema* 11). These films were stocked with abstract gory and sexual imagery, serving to shock the viewer by presenting otherwise unknown or unrealistic situations.

Figure 4 – Grotesque oddities in surrealist film, *Hour of the Wolf*, Ingmar Bergman, 1968

Purely surreal films draw only on the mental impulses of its director. Surreal inspiration in modern film exhibits itself far more subtly, involving the elements of miscommunication, disorientation, and dream sequences. Used incorrectly, their inclusion leaves viewers confused and without direction, but when employed effectively, they inspire proactive truth-seeking and retain audience attention.

Being John Malcovich

Charlie Kaufman's strongest role in film development is screenwriting, and his screenwriting is defined by its effective application of surreal, human concepts. He believes "your brain is wired to turn emotional states into movies" ("Charlie Kaufman | On Writing"). Those emotional states are what Kaufman tries to evoke with his writing. This parallels the surrealist aim of expressing one's unconscious mind, including emotions one does not necessarily understand. *Being John Malcovich* is among Kaufman's most dramatic plots, raising many complex, emotional questions, but his precise writing gives the surreal message emotional connotations.

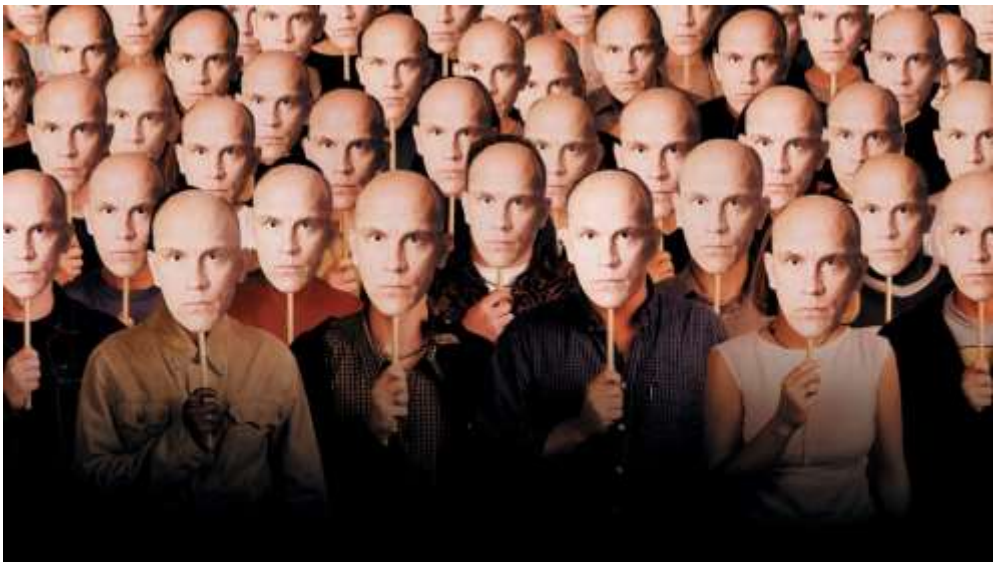

Figure 5 – *Being John Malkovich*, Spike Jones, 1999

Despite the world of the film being largely realistic and serious, there are few elements of fantasy and comedy which give a surreal sensation. One such component is a doorway which sends one's conscious into the mind of a specific individual. This unusual feature is woven sincerely into the otherwise realistic environment. The characters react so convincingly to this unrealistic element that the viewer can overcome disbelief and empathize with their situation.

Anomalisa

Charlie Kaufman wrote, directed, and produced *Anomalisa*, solidifying it as a useful film for understanding his filmmaking style. While containing similar themes, the film is less complex than Kaufman's other works. The plot of *Anomalisa* is in parallel with fundamental surrealist philosophy. Protagonist Michael Stone is tired of his reality, looking for a way to upset the monotony and find new, energizing, engaging experience. As the film goes on, odd events occur in higher concentrations, paralleling Stone's decent into insanity. Michael losing his mind perfectly mirrors the surrealist goal of escaping one's conscious mind.

Figure 6 – *Anomalisa*, Charlie Kaufman and Duke Johnson, 2015

When he has exhausted all other options for reliving the monotony of life, taking large risks feels like the only alternative to conscious decision making. The rules of true, unmitigated chance are totally outside our control, and that release of responsibility and understanding can be comforting. Fowlie expresses the value surrealists see escaping decision making into chance:

> [In the state of insanity,] man has to leave himself, move out from his habitual conventional reactions and see everything in the world, and particularly his own thoughts, in a totally fresh and unpredictable manner. Therefore, … chance coalitions which may take place in free imaginative states of mind are more valuable … than the logical juxtapositions we impose … in our trained consciously focused states of mind (33).

Alternatively, the rules of chance are entirely subject to reality, nullifying the surrealist hope of escape via chance. The importance of chance lies in the individual escape from consciousness – an individual not having knowledge of a random event's outcome. The importance of giving up your conscious will to chance is merely the desire to do so: the act of letting go.

Synecdoche, New York

Synecdoche, New York is Charlie Kaufman's directorial debut, fulfilling his desire for more refined control throughout the creative process. He uses this newfound creative control to continue the work he set out in his previous screenplays: tackling deep, brutal, human questions by presenting scenarios without clear-cut answers. Kaufman invites the viewer on a journey alongside him, where audience members attempt to learn from and grapple with the issues presented. No method could better match the ideology of surrealism, where each viewer is an artist responsible for their sole discovery of truth.

If you have not seen the film before this read, I cannot recommend it enough. Formulating your own thoughts and developing your own understanding will aid monumentally in interpreting the following information. This work is best experienced blind.

The film's atmosphere is not only permeated but defined by the surreal. Coincidences, oddities which characters ignore, and uncanny disavowments of the rules of time and space set the stage for the film's message. Unlike movies created purely with surrealism in mind, *Synecdoche, New York* is foremostly a human film, only using surrealist ideas to more fully develop its plot. Thus, not all the surrealist ideas presented are glaringly obvious; instead they are used in subtle ways to surprise the viewer rather than morbidly shock them at every turn.

Both due to their subtlety and interconnected complexity, Kaufman's themes are challenging to express fully in writing. Even with the additional information the film medium supplies, *Synecdoche, New York* requires multiple viewings to gain a clear understanding, as attested by Kaufman himself: "You need to see it twice to start picking up on the little details." (*In and About Synecdoche, New York*). This outline is not intended to be exhaustive, but to

present the basic themes, chronology, and characters, providing context for the discussion of its surrealist themes.

Timeline

A young girl sings about life, death, and the New York county of Schenectady. Her song is overtaken by the drone of an undesired morning radio station. Everyman Caden Cotard stares blankly into his bedroom mirror, expressing clear discontent and boredom with the day ahead.

Figure 7 – Caden staring into the mirror, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

We are introduced to Caden's day-to-day monotony, the dysfunctional relationship with his wife, and his work as a theater director. The box office is manned by Hazel: a chipper woman who actively seeks Caden's companionship. While he reciprocates the affection, Caden feels unable to act due to his marriage, child, and nervousness. During marriage counseling, Caden's wife Adele shares that she dreams of Caden dying, and she and their daughter Olive getting to retry life. Caden loves Olive, but has difficulty connecting to the four-year-old girl. Without telling Caden, Adele takes Olive and moves to Germany.

Figure 8 – Caden's monotonous family life, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

Figure 9 – Caden's medical appointment, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

Caden is constantly preoccupied with his health. He suffers an odd and diverse collection of illnesses including pustules, a fungal infection, and physical harm. Each doctor he sees is indifferent to his wellbeing, and the issues persist and collect over the course of his life.

While overcome with grief, Caden receives a massive directing grant and begins work on a theater piece which he hopes will "get at something true." Caden's playwriting method involves incorporating his real-life experiences. The actors portray the people in his life, and those same individuals work to produce the play. This leads to the mere performance causing changes in Caden's reality and the lives of the performers. Those changes are then incorporated into the performance, and the inceptive cycle continues until there is no clear distinction between what would have happened with and without the influence of the play.

Figure 10 – Performers playing real-life characters, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

Caden continues to lose himself and those around him. He goes through numerous failed relationships which each ending in confused discontent. He attempts to reconnect with his daughter, but she knows only lies about her father, told to her by her mother and lover. He attempts to enter a second long-term relationship, but his new daughter and wife only serve to remind him of the family he already lost. When he finally enters a reciprocal relationship with the only person who brings him sustaining joy, she dies after a single night. The tragedy of life burdens Caden until death. It is unrelenting. If he were not such a passive individual, he would have been personally destroyed. Caden grieves idly from depressing moment to moment, attentively aching to find meaning and purpose in it all. Nothing reveals itself to him, even unto death.

Figure 11 – Caden's sorrow, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

Time and Space

Manipulating time and space is a foremost characteristic of surrealist media. In *Synecdoche, New York*, manipulation of time presents events out of chronological order without informing the viewer, and occasionally skips large quantities of time between scenes. The film covers around seventy years in two hours, so the time between scenes is necessarily great. Kaufman expresses his awareness of these themes: "There are issues of time passage … in that sense of a dream-like reality – time moving in an irrational way." (*In and About Synecdoche, New York*).

The human mind does not experience time at a constant rate. Waiting anxiously causes time to move slower, while business quickens the pace. Thinking of time as constant is classical thought, where surrealism deviates with its focus on human experience. Because humans do not experience time steadily, surrealist media explore the implications of this individual reality. For example, after Adele leaves for Germany, Hazel tells Caden it has been a year. He responds that it has been a week. Hazel adoringly comments, "We've got to buy you a calendar." This misperception of time is in line with the monotony of Caden's routine and matches the surreal pacing between scenes of his life. Additionally, the opening scene of the film skips seamlessly between the day-to-day activities in various years, months, and days to illustrate the monotony of Caden's life. During this stage of his married life, each day blends into the next, and the years pass uneventfully. This manipulation of time is difficult to spot because of the viewer's assumption that scenes are organized chronologically. These details are subtle, but when noticed, add incredible depth to otherwise seemingly uneventful scenes: the depiction of a tedious life becomes commentary on the swift passage of existence.

Manipulation of space is exhibited in impossibly-sized spaces and cutting between different places without informing the viewer, which is most clearly seen in the warehouse. Caden sets his play in an unrealistically massive warehouse located in downtown New York. Within the warehouse, he constructs a set of New York City itself, eventually recreating the warehouse on a smaller scale. Throughout the film, characters travel through warehouses within warehouses within warehouses, going as many as four warehouses deep. There's no visible change in scale. The largest distinction between individual warehouses is that as characters travel inward, the set becomes less finished as crews continue to construct it. In an interior warehouse, Caden sees an airplane flying inside. The impossibility makes this surreal.

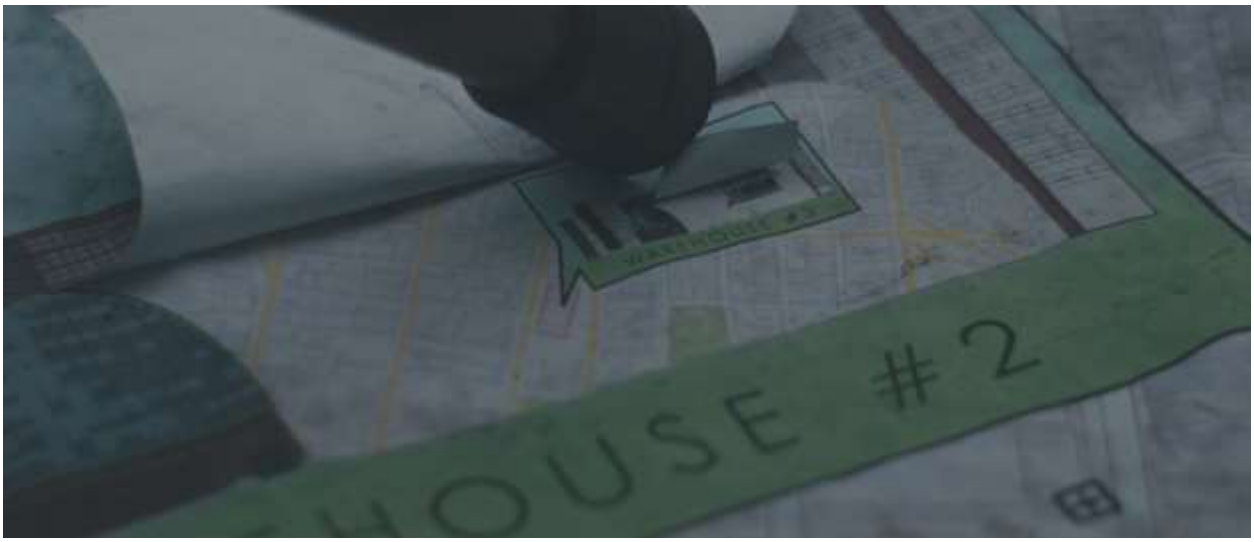

Figure 12 – Inceptive warehouses, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

This inceptive, unrealistic space being constructed mirrors Caden's attempt to come to an understanding of his own existence. While he intends to discover something true about himself by analyzing life and something profound by developing his play, both efforts only deepen the situation's complexity. The farther he journeys, the more clearly he sees enlightenment to be impossibly distant.

Figure 13 – The set, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

The set for Caden's play is a remanufacturing of real places the audience sees during the film. This duplication of locations is used to dislocate the audience without telling them. In one such scene, Caden is on the set representing actress Claire's apartment. The line between reality and performance fades as an improvisational discussion on set harbors real-life implications. Caden is kicked out of Claire's apartment in reality, and the camera transitions from the set to her apartment without an intervening scene indicating travel. This causes the strange sensation of being misplaced when Caden leaves what the audience understood to be a set to the street outside Claire's apartment.

These distortions of space not only make things larger than life, but are equally capable of making things seem smaller. Caden's first wife Adele is an artist, painting portraits on a miniature scale. Taken by itself, the skill to paint with such precision struck me as a niche artistic talent, but alongside the metaphorical interpretations and life-affecting consequence of her work, the miniature portraits take on a surreal edge.

Figure 14 – Adele's artistry, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

While discussing a painting with Caden, Adele mentions having to package two portraits, and we see the shipping materials, depicted in figure 15. Perhaps this is only a stylistic delivery method for Adele, but it remains striking visual imagery. This is the closest *Synecdoche, New York* ever comes to a joke: unexpected situational humor. Only one such moment of the film made me laugh: Caden is discussing his play with other staff members, when he rejects an idea on the grounds that they have "enormous budgetary concerns." Bear in mind the play involves recursively recreating expansive subsections of New York City in minute detail, at realistically unfathomable costs.

Figure 15 – Packaging miniature paintings, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

In opposition to the grand scale of Caden's play, Adele's artistic focus is smaller than reality. Sammy, Caden's stalker and representative actor says of Adele "no one stares truth in the face like she does." Sammy's statement seems to be untrue in reality, but accurately represents what Caden thinks of Adele. Numerous times Adele states, "I don't know what I'm doing" when referring to her life direction. Adele could be searching for truth on a small scale or she could be ignoring the larger truths altogether. The fact that Caden thinks highly of her truth-seeking is potentially damaging to his own efforts. Adele's method involves hurting Caden and using their daughter Olive as nothing more than an artistic prop in Germany. Caden dislikes these results of Adele's method, yet idolizes her nonetheless. Adele becomes famous in Germany, potentially as a result of her honesty in truth seeking, but I interpreted this in the opposite, more negative way. Despite her ineffective methods of self-discovery, the fickle fate of life brings her joy, fulfillment and fame while Caden's more earnest search is met only with disappointment and loss. Simply put, life is often unfair, and Caden archetypically receives the short end of the stick.

Alternatively, while Caden is busy running away from reality by externalizing his fears or exploding the scale, Adele's fame seems to occur naturally, if not surreally quickly. This is another example of time compression.

There are two additional noteworthy examples. Large sections of time are cut between Caden's dental appointments, jumping from his diagnosis to his gum surgery months later. Preoccupation with his health problems reduces the importance of any other mundane events taking place in his life. Secondly, at the funeral for Caden's father, his mother tells him that his father's casket is small because there was so little left of him. It does not make reasonable sense why they would use a small casket, especially one which could not contain his extended skeletal

frame. The gap between realism and information provided from the film creates a strong surreal sensation.

Figure 16 – Caden's father's funeral, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

This distortion of space and time represents Caden's confusion in life. Kaufman's use of surrealism allows the audience to get a taste of that same turmoil. Caden, as a consequence of his tragic archetype, experiences only pain and misfortune. Equally polarizing films exist in which the protagonist receives only blessings in life, but these do not stretch the viewer to consider the darker aspects of their own existence. They bring only comfort, where Kaufman's explicit mission is to bring about earnest questioning.

Hazel's Burning Home

When Hazel purchases her home, she casually remarks to the realtor that she is "just really concerned about dying in the fire." After a brief pause, the realtor assures her that "It's a big decision, how one prefers to die." All the while, uncannily cheerful music fills the air.

The realtor's son Derek lives in the basement, and Hazel marries him out of convenience representing her abandonment of Caden. The house begins slowly burning, but by the end of the film, every surface is charred black. When Hazel dies, the medic comments, "It might have been smoke inhalation." The fire killed her slowly, representing the slow death that results from an unsatisfactory life. Her marriage is uninteresting, ending with her husband leaving, and the night she is unified with her life-long love, she dies. It is too late to reclaim the passed-by joy of life.

Figure 17 – Hazel's burning house,
***Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008**

Many characters interact with Hazel's home, but none of them are shocked or surprised by the perpetual fire. Caden is nervous about visiting her home, and turns to look in the direction of some flame. In the next scene it is revealed he was merely checking the time. He never shows concern about the fire and they continue a typical, surreal conversation.

Figure 18 – Caden's nervous visit,
***Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008**

Death and Decay

Between Caden's tragic life experiences, numerous health issues, and the apocalypse taking place at the film's end, *Synecdoche, New York* is solely focused on death and loss. When the film begins, the life Caden leads is at its peak, with a stable, semi-fulfilling job and intact marriage. Each of these pockets of order descend into chaos over the course of the film.

Figure 19 – One of Caden's detached doctors, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

Caden's most tragic and reoccurring loss is that of his daughter Olive, who receives a full-body tattoo of beautiful red flowers. On her deathbed, the flowers appear to be wilting. When she dies, the flower petals begin to fall from her body. This powerful imagery is surreal because it does not mimic the way tattoos decay in reality. The flowers' death mirrors her own.

Figure 20 – Olive's withering tattoo, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

Over the course of the latter half of the film, an apocalyptic event takes place, killing the majority of the New York City population. Corpses can be seen scattered throughout the first few warehouses, thinning as Caden moves inward. Are these individuals dead because of the event or as performers representing the state of the real New York City? In either case, it is surreal to see dead bodies on the theatrical set. The death of the city mirrors Caden's personal death.

Figure 21 – The apocalyptic warehouse interior, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

Caden

In the first act of *Synecdoche, New York*, Caden is going about his daily routine. He's shaving at the bathroom sink when the faucet dislodges without warning, striking Caden's forehead violently. This incident leaves him with a scar that is visible throughout the remainder of the film. This event is a microcosm of Caden's life: tragic occurrences interrupting his otherwise humdrum existence. The scar represents the suffering Caden undergoes that follows him through the remainder of the film. In true surrealist fashion, this tragedy is Caden's alone, occurring solely to him and being shared by no one. Only Caden has the opportunity to change his fate, but Caden takes no action to do so.

Observation and action are not interchangeable. Caden watches the world around him with unrelenting eyes, but is hardly capable of independent action. When others direct him, he acts without hesitation, but he is slow to express himself and act of his own accord. As with the audience, Caden is an observer of the world behind the screen, but unlike the viewer, he receives the full brunt of this world's dream-like tragedy. This character trait mimics a surreal, dream-like state where a person experiences but cannot influence the world around them. They are subject to fate, and fate has no accountability.

Throughout the film, cartoon segments address the themes of fate, time, and death. These educational children's segments are made surreal by the appearance of dark and mature themes, contrasting typically colorful and chipper children's entertainment. Caden and his real-life situations make occasional appearances. This merging of reality and fiction is textbook surrealism, working to put the observant viewer on edge. The human character represented in the cartoon looks like Caden. Caden's last name appears in the first scene, and his real-life stalker appears in the second. Both of these appearances are too specific to be mere coincidence. This

Figure 22 – Cartoons, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

along with Caden being pulled in a wagon is representative of Caden's inaction leading him to be carried idly through life. In the second frame, Caden is smoking a cigarette, while he does not smoke in real life. This mirrors his self-destructive behavior, despite his health concerns.

The TV is not the only source of influence on Caden's mood and outlook. Other people have extraordinary power over him, as he allows their wills and thoughts to take the place of his inaction. For example, Caden is referred to as homosexual and female numerous times throughout the film. Standing alone, these would merely be odd occurrences, but their frequency and Caden's response makes them surreal. He begins to think he would have been better being a girl, when without the influence of others' opinions, this outlook would have never arisen.

Further widening the gap between Caden's personhood and others, he constantly verbally misunderstands and is misunderstood. These mistakes often lead to implied meanings radically different from what was intended. While miscommunication is not inherently surreal, its consistency and relevant implications are. These verbal misunderstandings are noteworthy because the audio of the film matches the words Caden believes he hears, not the words spoken. It is more than a response from the characters: the viewer equally takes part in misunderstanding. These instances in the film are listed below:

- Caden attempts to explain plumbing to his daughter, comparing pipes to veins, but inadvertently scares her when she realizes her body is full of blood.
- Caden misunderstands the doctor saying "neurologist," causing confused conversation.
- Adele misunderstands Caden's words and intentions while on the phone from Germany.
- During a conversation about suicide, Caden asks his psychiatrist why an individual would kill himself. She responds, "I don't know. Why did you?" When Caden looks shocked, she quickly repeats herself, this time saying "Why *would* you?" This is made more surreal later when Caden attempts suicide, then enormously more so when the character in his play performing himself – Sammy – successfully commits suicide.
- Claire and Caden run into his love interest Hazel at a private dinner scheduled to discuss Claire's character in Caden's upcoming play. Hazel's presence brings a dramatic tension to the meeting. Claire asks Caden, "Can you tell me what it is that you want from me?" Tension fills the air before she clarifies "…from my character?"
- Caden visits a doctor and holds an extended, confusing conversation as to whether he is dying, littered with misunderstanding. This particular instance of confusion could represent the impossibility of discovering clear truths about death.

In surrealism, the line between reality and imagination is blurred, maintaining that occasionally more truth can be garnered from fiction than experience. In one scene, Adele has just left with Olive to go to Germany, leaving Caden alone. He sees a commercial for cancer treatment and visualizes his family living the happy life depicted by the treated patients. After this happy scene, images of Caden as an old man and people he does not yet know appear on the screen. Caden could not have imagined these future events, and they have no conscious origin. He does not know the future, nor the people depicted on the screen.

Figure 23 – Caden sees himself on TV, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

It is difficult to determine whether the family scene is memory or imagined, because both are discredited by the later scenes. It is not a memory because the other scenes are things he has not yet experienced. It is not imagined because there is no conscious origin of the later scenes. Surrealism discredits rational answers. Confusion aside, this is another example of Caden misinterpreting reality, alongside his constant auditory misunderstandings. His experiences are not trustworthy; they are not always representative of reality.

Caden facilitates the disorienting development of fiction by recreating reality in his play. After their separation, Adele purchases an apartment in New York, which Caden reconstructs inside the warehouse. During one of his performances as the character Ellen, he hears sound coming from within the suite. When he enters, no one is present; only a tape recording of Adele's voice and the set's shower left running. This is not representative of Caden's real-world experience at Adele's apartment, making it surreal that the recreation would be set in such a way. The longing loneliness Caden feels because of Adele's separation fuels his illusions, causing further difficulty distinguishing reality. This cycle overtakes Caden's life.

Sammy

Figure 24 – Sammy stalking Caden, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

Every event of Caden's life is known by himself and Sammy. This man stalks Caden throughout the entire film, making subtle appearances in numerous scenes. Many places he appears are surreal due to their private nature. For example, he is present at Hazel's family party, despite being seemingly unrelated. He holds Caden's second daughter Ariel while watching Claire and Caden have sex. Sammy later reveals that his life's work is learning Caden better than he knows himself. This coincidentally matches Caden's journey of self-discovery.

Sammy is instrumental in revealing Caden's inner emotions with more clarity than Caden could otherwise uncover. For example, the first time Sammy and Caden meet, Sammy directly and explicitly vocalizes Caden's sexual feelings for Hazel, something which had previously been unspoken. Caden internalizes his emotions, but Sammy states how Caden is feeling out loud. He is always correct, and causes Caden to inspect these stated emotions more clearly.

The Psychiatrist

Caden's psychiatrist is the most surreal supporting character in *Synecdoche, New York*. She manifests every category of surreal behavior: showing up at unrealistic times, misinterpreting communications, lacking expected social realism, and exhibiting knowledge of events she could not know.

Her entire character is metaphorical, although she also exists literally. After Caden obsesses over the pustules on his leg, he attends a counseling session and notices the same ailment on the psychiatrist's foot. Despite being in a position of supposed knowledge and authority, she has flaws just like those she treats. During the same session, she cuts Caden off as he tries to explain his loneliness. She does not appear to be listening. She is only waiting for an opening to sell her book.

Figure 25 – The psychiatrist's bookshelf, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

Early in the film, she convinces Caden to buy it. The book only serves to further confuse Caden as he attempts to understand its verbose and oddly personal advice. The chapter Caden is currently reading often pertains to the other events occurring in his life, but he never finds peace

or understanding. This complexity might represent Caden's questioning of life, and despite his constant struggle for answers, he never reaches a conclusion.

The psychiatrist lacks any personal connection to Caden whatsoever. She frequently cuts him off in conversation, even during their paid counseling sessions. She uses his image to attract buyers on her website, along with the unusual phrase "It'll change my LIFE!", set in the future tense. Her book results in no change in Caden's wellbeing. He gives it a thorough attempt, but in the end, the book gives up on Caden before he gives up on the psychiatrist's advice.

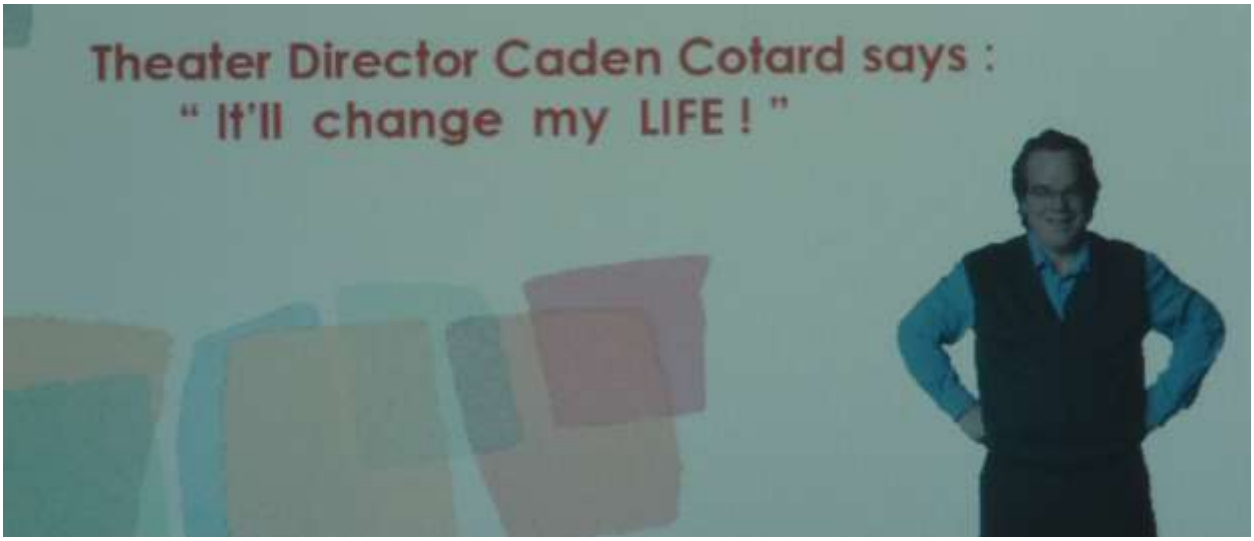

Figure 26 – The psychiatrist's website, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

During his last session reading the book, Caden is killing time on a plane to Germany. He reads a sentence where the author writes that she is always with him. She is then revealed to be on the same plane, sitting directly across from him. Caden is confused alongside the audience, so after a brief pause, the psychiatrist explains, "When you canceled your session, it freed me up, so I'm travelling too." This is made surreal by the combination of improbable events and the pacing at which Kaufman reveals them. The book then begins to narrate their exact interaction. She flirts with Caden sexually, but as defined by his character, Caden does not act on her advances.

She proceeds to ignore Caden, and the book proceeds to end with the words “this book is over.” Both the psychiatrist and the book give Caden the cold shoulder. Literally, this represents the end of any potential relationship between the psychiatrist and Caden. Figuratively, it marks the end of receiving any potential help from the outside world due to Caden’s own inaction. This is unlikely a product of Caden’s imagination because of the effects the psychiatrist has on other characters and the world. She interacts with other characters, and maintains a physical presence throughout the film.

Figure 27 – The psychiatrist is revealed on Caden’s plane, *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman, 2008

During the final scene of *Synecdoche, New York*, the psychiatrist’s books are scattered throughout Caden’s various warehouses. After not having appeared since an hour earlier in the film, why is her character reintroduced just before Caden’s death? The quick and easy solutions of her method could not save Caden from the inevitable curtain of doom to close his life.

Conclusion

In Kaufman's sole lecture on writing, he expresses nothing more adamantly than his desire that writing should manifest something human, vulnerable, and meaningful ("Charlie Kaufman | On Writing"). *Synecdoche, New York* might be the most vulnerable conceivable film. Caden's goal to seek something real in the theatrical medium perfectly and soberingly mirrors Kaufman's desire to express human truth in film. Caden does not understand himself, and while seeking his true self, he journeys to the scale of making a play about everything. He uses this performance to attempt to make sense of his own life. Caden says, "It's not just about death… It's about everything." He repeatedly urges all involved in his production to channel themselves and their experiences – both good and grueling – into their performances. In the film's conclusion, the lines separating reality and performance, characters and human beings are completely transparent. But in the end, the scale shrinks back to that of the individual. Caden's life experience and the lives of those around him become the focus as his life draws to a close. Even after the most earnest effort of truth-seeking ever put to screen, Caden dies without answers.

Surrealism is about the futility of truth-seeking. At its core are the methods we use to seek what little we can know for sure. It presents meaninglessness, or at least how far off meaning really is. It begins with life, and ends with the death of every individual. *Synecdoche, New York* showcases an entire archetypically tragic life of one man, using surrealist ideas to have the viewer relate and explore their own insecurities about life, death, and everything.

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Synecdoche, New York. Directed by Charlie Kaufman, Sony Pictures Classics, 2008.

Annotated Bibliography

Ades, Dawn. *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed.* London, Westerham Press, 1978.

In this historical review of the ideas predating surrealism, Ades links Dadaist fluidly, marking the events and people that span the two movements' histories. The historical origin of surrealism was the most valuable aspect of this book, as summaries of surrealism itself were better found in other sources.

Alquié, Ferdinand. *The Philosophy of Surrealism*. Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1965.

Alquié proposes we must separate science from philosophy. Surrealism is not an instrument of science, nor does it use science to achieve its ends.

> "To distinguish philosophy from science we must realize that philosophy is an undertaking of man as a whole, not a system concerning objects. It is beyond question that, in this sense, surrealist research has something at once nonliterary and nonscientific and that it aims at observing and exploring regions neglected by physics as well as by the arts; its procedures are little reducible to rational methods as to strictly aesthetic expression. Besides, surrealism involves an authentic theory of love, of life, of the imagination, of the relations between man and the world. All this supposes a philosophy, which I have tried to isolate and define" (Ferdinand 4).

This resource will prove crucial to my initial understanding of the surrealist movement's goals and the ideological propositions it affirms to achieve them. Being a dated analysis of surrealism – but written after the movement's initial swell and wane – will aid my

understanding of how surrealism has continued to evolve, and how it is depicted in modern media, differently from its roots.

Anomalisa. Directed by Duke Johnson and Charlie Kaufman, Paramount Pictures, 2015.

Charlie Kaufman directed, produced, and wrote *Anomalisa* making it an incredible source for understanding his directional methods. The film follows public speaker Michael Stone through the climax of his life's monotony, the extreme emotions it makes him feel, and the risks it makes him take. The surrealist elements of the film are written subtly and directly aid the overarching narrative. The plot highlights our limited ability to understand reality through our senses, and the ways we can easily be led astray by our minds.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation,* University of Michigan Press, 1994.

This philosophical writing aims to analyze reality and our modes of understanding reality, differentiating such from the representations that fill our senses and minds. Baudrillard questions the symbols and frameworks through which we intend to understand reality as to whether they are based in reality whatsoever. He presents a historical timeline through which these changes have taken place.

This philosophical angle will fuel my analysis of audience interpretation of surreal events in film in general and *Synecdoche, New York*.

Being John Malkovich. Directed by Spike Jonze, Written by Charlie Kaufman, Gramercy Pictures, Propaganda Films, Single Cell Pictures, 1999.

This film helped kickoff Charlie Kaufman's notoriety as a deep and provocative writer. The film deals with themes of life, surreal fantasy, and interpersonal drama. Many of the same themes with reappear in *Synecdoche, New York*. This film helped my become more familiar with Kaufman's writing techniques and characters.

Caws, Mary Ann. *Surrealism*. London, Phaidon Press Limited, 2004.

Caws presents a well-researched visual history of surrealism. The book is in the format of a timeline, outlining a large selection of events and artistic works for the surrealist movement and beyond. The later portion of the book focused on more modern artwork inspired by surreal ideas.

This resource has been helpful in framing my view of surrealism's effects on modern art.

Durozoi, Gérard. *History of the Surrealist Movement*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2002.

This book is an exhaustive visual guide to the development of surrealist art. The notable historical events taking place over the course of the surrealist movement and major artistic achievements are bolstered be a collection of catered, lesser-known pieces of art stretching many mediums including film, literature, and the visual arts. The collection of lesser-known works provides me with a greatly broadened context of the surrealist movement at its origin.

Fowlie, Wallace. *Age of Surrealism*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1972.

Fowlie seeks to define the philosophical and artistic components of surrealism, and compare them to those of other notable movements, including classicism and romanticism. He relates surrealism to romanticism is that it's derived from within individuals. He accounts for the words of notable philosophical figures, as well as artists expressing surrealist ideas.

The various frameworks used to craft modern art are not isolated. Directors can use classical, romantic and surrealist ideas in different elements of a single work, especially on the large scale of a feature-length film. Understanding movements aside from surrealism will aid in my pinpointing and differentiating them in *Synecdoche, New York* and other art sources.

In and About Synecdoche, New York. Synecdoche, New York, Directed by Charlie Kaufman, Sony Pictures Classics, 2008.

In this behind-the-scenes, Charlie Kaufman, the producer, and many other individuals involved in the production of the film discuss their experiences during storyboarding and shooting. Many of the antidotal accounts document how the performers responded to the obscurity and complexity of the film material. Kaufman himself weighs in on his intentions regarding the audience and the message of the film.

Kuenzli, Rudolf E. *Dada and Surrealist Film*. New York, Willis Locker & Owens, 1987.

The author documents Dada's influence on surrealist filmmakers, and the films that follow. A brief history of Dada's surrealist works is overviewed, and surrealist films from the 1920s-1940s are deconstructed to define their surrealist components.

As a core member of surrealism's instigation, understanding Dada's philosophy and application in art will vastly improve my knowledge regarding the aims and history of surrealism.

Levy, Julien. *Surrealism*. New York, The Black Sun Press, 1936.

Surrealism outlines the development of surrealist ideas as deriving from Dadaism. This book begins earlier in history, before the surrealism movement began. Instead, it focuses on the people and events surrounding surrealism's coming into being.
Because it is written so early in the life of surrealism, Julien provides a unique account without foreknowledge of how surrealist ideas would develop into modern culture. The author can only guess at what is to come.

Matthews, J.H. *An Introduction to Surrealism*. University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1965.

According to Matthews, no artistic movement has matched surrealism's consistency. At the time of writing, the methodology had been developed for around 40 years, and yet art from its beginning and from its modern end bear resemblance in both form and ideological function.

Matthews seeks to understand the techniques surrealists utilize to produce paintings and poetry, but only as a pathway to understanding their intentions. According to Matthews, the artistic methods surrealist artists use are means, not ends in themselves. Discovering the techniques can aid in understanding an artist's intentions.

Nadeau, Maurice. *The History of Surrealism*. Cambridge, The Belknap Press, 1989.

"Understood as a certain tendency, not to transcend but to penetrate reality, to 'arrive at an ever more precise and at the same time ever more passionate apprehension of the tangible world,' goal of all philosophies whose object is not merely the preservation of the world as it is, eternally unslaked thirst in the heart of man" (Nadeau 36). This illustrates the author's desire to explore surrealism, not only as an artistic movement, but as a philosophy.

"The author had the weakness to take surrealism seriously" (Nadeau 35). Nadeau views surrealism as an objective outsider – a position from which it is difficult to get a sense of scale or realism of its beliefs. Perhaps it has the advantages of being readable and relatable, but it certainly does not provide a complete picture of surrealist intentions. Nadeau's awareness of this weakness will doubtless produce a unique collection of insights.

Nadeau states that surrealism is useless for its mere production of art, fortunes, and a few rich men. The promise of surrealism has always been a transcendent transformation of reality. Those who admire surrealism for its true goals will know to leave it behind when it becomes stagnant in this aim, and pursue beliefs that will bring change about. This

belief mirrors the theme of distorting reality in *Synecdoche, New York* and will aid in my interpretation.

Richardson, Michael. *Surrealism and Cinema*. Oxford, Berg, 2006.

Richardson provides a detailed history of surrealist film, and the methods these filmmakers developed. This book avoids the philosophical questions of surrealism to focus largely on the history of its films and individuals responsible for its development and promotion. This will aid in my understanding of the surrealist movement, its milestones of art, and my interpretation of surrealist philosophy.

Sharot, Stephen. "Dreams in Films and Films as Dreams: Surrealism and Popular American Cinema." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, Spring 2015, pp. 66-89. *Project* MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/679936. Accessed Feb. 28, 2020.

Both the surrealist filmmakers' use of dream-like states and the otherwise all-inclusive staring of dreams in film are examined and compared, finding differences between their use and effect. This article focuses on specific films and filmmaking techniques. *Synecdoche, New York* contains both methods. This article will provide a lens through which to analyze the dream sequences in *Synecdoche, New York* and compare them to the surrealist, waking sections.

Synecdoche, New York. Directed by Charlie Kaufman, Sony Pictures Classics, 2008.

The film follows the life of everyman Caden Cotard, a theater director who sets out to create a brutally realistic production, gradually blurring his life, fiction, and reality in the pursuit. This premise allows Kaufman to dramatically explore surrealism by presenting

the viewer with information that is intentionally abstract. As the plot goes on, it gradually becomes more abstract, culminating in the acceptance of our inability to understand reality, and our ability to warp and destroy it.